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ABSTRACT

This report presents the results of a survey of over 1,500 Nebraska students in grades 8 and 10 in 1988. Students in 37 schools were asked about their involvement in physical fights; about their access to weapons; about being victims of robbery, physical assault, threats and attempts at forced sex; about their attitudes toward violence and coercion; and about attitudes toward and attempts at suicide. Some of the results reported in this document include: (1) over half of 8th-grade and 10th-grade males reported having been in a physical fight at least once during the past year; (2) a substantial majority of the 10th-grade males reported that they could get a gun if they wanted to; (3) 8th-grade males, followed by 8th-grade females were most likely to have been robbery victims; (4) almost half of the students reported having been threatened with physical assault; (5) almost 20% of students were actually attacked either at school or outside of school; (6) a substantial proportion of both males and females reported that attempts were made to force them to have sex; (7) 35% of the females and 18% of the males indicated that they had often felt sad or hopeless in the past 30 days; and (8) a considerable proportion had known someone who had attempted suicide. The report concludes that even though violence is a multifaceted problem, enough is known to develop potentially effective prevention programs. (ABL)

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VIOLENCE, VICTIMS AND SUICIDE: NEBRASKA ADOLESCENTS' ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS

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Technical Report 23
Violence, Victims and Suicide: Nebraska Adolescents' Attitudes and Behaviors

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Violence, Victims and Suicide: Nebraska Adolescents' Attitudes and Behaviors

Introduction

How pervasive is violence among Nebraska adolescents?

As part of the Nebraska Adolescent Student Health Survey of 1988, a sample of Nebraska students in Grades 8 and 10 in 37 schools were asked about their involvement in physical fights; about their access to weapons; about being victims of robbery, physical assault, threats and attempts at forced sex; about their attitudes to violence and coercion; and about attitudes toward and attempts at suicide.[1]

Part 1
Violence

Fights

A "fight" was defined as "a physical fight...when two people hit each other or attack each other with weapons, not when they yell or shout." Table 1 shows that 62% of the 8th-grade males and 55% of the 10th-grade males reported having been in a physical fight at least once during the past year. Thirty percent of both 8th- and 10th-grade females reported fighting at least once during the past year. Many students reported having physical fights more than six times in the past year.

Table 1

"During the past year, how many times were you in a physical fight? (A physical fight is when two people hit each other or attack each other with weapons, not when they yell or shout.)

	8th Grade Females %	10th Grade Females %	8th Grade Males %	10th Grade Males %	Average %
0 times	70	70	38	45	57
1 time	11	10	19	23	16
2 times	8	8	18	11	11
3-5 times	6	6	13	7	8
6 or more times	6	5	12	14	9
N =	397	417	365	374	1553

Avoiding fights

Students were asked about effective ways to avoid fighting. Table 2 shows the tendency of students to resort to violent or coercive methods to avoid fighting. Although the majority do not suggest such methods, a substantial minority do.

About one-fifth of all students felt that threatening to use a weapon was an effective way to avoid fighting. Almost one-quarter of all the male students surveyed felt that carrying a weapon was an effective way to avoid fighting. About one-fifth of the male students also felt that joining a gang for protection was an effective way to avoid fighting.

Table 2

"Are the following effective ways to avoid fighting?"

Percent who answered yes:	8th Grade Females %	10th Grade Females %	8th Grade Males %	10th Grade Males %	Average %
threatening to use a weapon	19	20	18	19	19
carrying a weapon	11	6	23	24	16
joining a gang for protection	9	6	20	18	13
N =	397	416	361	372	1546

Eighth-grade boys were twice as likely as 8th-grade girls to approve of carrying a weapon and joining a gang to avoid fighting. Among the 10th-graders, four times as many boys approved of carrying a weapon as girls, and three times as many boys as girls approved of joining a gang.

There was a relationship between aggressive behavior and approval of violence among these respondents. The tendency for those involved in fights in the last year to approve

Table 3

"Are the following effective ways to avoid fighting?": A comparison of fighters and nonfighters (Table 1).

	Females		Males	
Percent who approved of:	Fighters %	Non-Fighters %	Fighters %	Non-Fighters %
threatening to use a weapon	21	19	22	13
carrying a weapon	15	6	25	21
joining a gang for protection	13	5	25	11
N =	244	569	432	*307

of violent methods to protect themselves ("avoid fighting") compared to those not involved in fights is shown in Table 3. Fighters are more apt than non-fighters to report that violent methods or the threat of violent methods are effective ways to avoid violence.

Guns

Two general questions asked about guns. Respondents were asked whether they could get a gun if they wanted one and on how many occasions they had used a gun during the past year.

A substantial majority (69%) of the 10th-grade males reported they could get a gun if they wanted. Even among the 8th-grade females, who used guns the least often, 19% believed they could get a gun if they wanted one (Table 4).

Table 4

"Could you get a handgun if you wanted to?

	8th Grade Females %	10th Grade Females %	8th Grade Males %	10th Grade Males %	Average %
Percent "Yes":	19	28	44	69	39
N =	395	418	364	372	1549

Table 5 is based on data from a separate sample of same-grade Nebraskans who completed a different form of the questionnaire. This total project included three samples and three forms of the questionnaire. These data show that 53% of Nebraska students had used a gun in the last year; males were three times as likely to have done so than females. Forty-seven percent of the 8th-grade males and 46% of the 10th-grade males had used a gun on eleven or more occasions during the past year.

Table 5

"During the past year, about how many times did you use a handgun, rifle, or shotgun for any reason (including hunting or target shooting)?"

	8th Grade Females %	10th Grade Females %	8th Grade Males %	10th Grade Males %	Average %
0 times	74	73	25	18	47
1-10 times	20	23	28	36	28
11 or more times	6	4	47	46	25
N =	449	463	454	461	1827

To examine the relationship between perceived availability of guns and aggressive tendencies, we divided respondents into fighters (those who reported they had been in a physical fight in the last year) and nonfighters (those who reported they had not been in a fight in the last year). Fighters were more likely than nonfighters to report access to a gun: 66% of the male fighters compared to 43% of the male nonfighters and 38% of the female fighters compared to 17% of the female nonfighters.

Students who thought they could get a gun if they wanted one were more likely than those who thought they could not get a gun to feel that threatening to use a weapon, carrying a weapon or joining a gang for protection were effective ways to avoid fighting (Table 6). These findings, as well as those which link fighting and the approval of violent methods, suggest that fighting, approval of coercive methods and the availability of guns are part of a general climate of violence for some Nebraska students.

Table 6

Comparison of attitudes toward violence and handgun availability.

	Females		Males	
	Could get a gun %	Couldn't get a gun %	Could get a gun %	Couldn't get a gun %
Approved of threatening to use a weapon as an effective way to avoid fighting	30	20	30	27
Approved of carrying a weapon as an effective way to avoid fighting	22	7	34	24
Approved of joining a gang for protection as an effective way to avoid fighting	17	5	28	17
N* =	203	302	326	135

*A "don't know" option accounts for the difference in the number of students who could and could not get a gun and the total sample size.

Part 2
Victims

The extent to which Nebraska adolescents are victims is a decisive indicator of the violence in their lives. Respondents were asked to report victimization of four types during the previous year: robbery, physical attack, threats, and attempts at forced sex. Students were asked about these same four types of victimization both at school and outside of school. Tables 7 and 8 show their responses.

Robbery

It was not uncommon both at school and outside of school for students to report being robbed by force. Twenty percent of the students reported that they had something taken from them by force or threat of force while at school. Eighth-grade males were mostly likely to be robbery victims (30% robbed at school; 29% outside of school), followed by 8th-grade females (23% robbed at school; 25% outside of school).

Threats

Almost half the students reported having been threatened with physical assault both at school and outside of school. This is a large percentage of Nebraska youth who are subject, at least occasionally, to intimidation by threats of violence.

Table 7

"Think back over the last 12 months. While at school, or on a school bus, did someone..."

	8th Grade Females %	10th Grade Females %	8th Grade Males %	10th Grade Males %	Average %
...take something from you by using force or by threatening to hurt you?	23	13	30	17	20
...threaten to hurt you but not actually hurt you?	44	42	55	47	47
...attack you?	10	14	27	20	17
...try to force you to have sex when you did not want to?	8	12	9	7	9
N =	395	417	363	373	1547

Physical Assault

Almost 20% of these students were actually attacked either at school or outside of school. Again, 8th-grade males were mostly likely to be victims of attack, just as they were most likely to report having been in fights (Table 1).

Sexual Assault

A significant proportion of the total sample of both males and females reported that attempts were made to force them to have sex, either at school or outside of school, within the last year. Tenth-grade females were the most likely to report such attempts: 12% reported assault at school, 26% reported assault outside of school.

Table 8

"Think back over the last 12 months. While outside of school did someone..."

	8th Grade Females %	10th Grade Females %	8th Grade Males %	10th Grade Males %	Average %
...take something from you by using force or by threatening to hurt you?	25	20	29	15	22
...threaten to hurt you but not actually hurt you?	43	40	47	37	42
...attack you?	13	19	27	23	20
...try to force you to have sex when you did not want to?	15	26	12	11	16
N =	395	417	363	373	1547

Part 3
Suicide

Suicide is violence perpetrated upon one's self.

According to Table 9 a considerable proportion (64%) of these 8th- and 10th-grade Nebraska adolescents have known someone who committed suicide. Thirty-nine percent report that they have "seriously thought about" trying to hurt themselves in a way that might result in death. A significant number (18%) reported taking some action that they interpreted as having attempted suicide. Females were more likely than males to have known suicides, to have considered suicide and to have attempted suicide, according to these data.

Suicide and Feelings of Depression

It is suggested that depression and stress are related to suicidal tendencies. Three questions asked:

1. "How often in the past 30 days have you felt sad and hopeless?"
2. "How often in the past 30 days have you felt there was nothing to look forward to?", and
3. "How difficult is it for you to handle stressful situations at home and at school?"

In this sample, 35% of the females and 18% of the males indicated they had "often" felt sad or hopeless in the past 30 days. Twenty percent of the females and 9% of the males "often" had the feeling, in the past 30 days, that they had "nothing to look forward to". Of the females, 52% said it was "hard" or "very hard" to handle stressful situations at

Table 9

Suicide

	8th Grade Females %	10th Grade Females %	8th Grade Males %	10th Grade Males %	Average %
"Has anyone you know ever tried to commit suicide?"					
% "Yes":	70	76	53	57	64
"Have you ever seriously thought about trying to hurt yourself in a way that might result in your death?"					
% "Yes":	41	49	32	33	39
"Have you ever actually tried to hurt yourself in a way that might have resulted in your death?"					
% "Yes":	22	23	15	14	18
N =	445	461	446	460	1812

home and school; 32% of the males also expressed this feeling.

A common question asked of data of this type is whether the feeling of sadness and hopelessness, the feeling of having nothing to look forward to and difficulties in handling stressful situations at home and school are related to the likelihood that a young person would try to "hurt" herself or himself "in a way that might result in death" (attempt suicide).

The relationships are not clear.

Table 10 shows that a larger proportion of the students who had attempted to hurt themselves also reported often experiencing feelings of hopelessness, having nothing to look forward to and difficulty handling stressful situations than students who had not attempted to hurt themselves. This table also suggests, however, that in actual numbers, more young people who had *not* tried to hurt themselves also reported feeling sad and hopeless, having nothing to look forward to and finding it difficult to handle stressful situations.

Viewed still another way, 11% of the females and 9% of the males who had never felt sad and hopeless in the last 30 days nevertheless reported having tried to hurt themselves in a way that might have resulted in their death. Eight percent of the females and 6% of the males who in the past month had *ever* reported having nothing to look forward to neverthe-

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Table 10

Depression and stress compared to incidences of students trying to hurt themselves in a way that might have resulted in their deaths.

	Females		Males	
	Have tried to hurt self %	Have not tried to hurt self %	Have tried to hurt self %	Have not tried to hurt self %
Percent who, in the last month:				
often felt sad and hopeless	62	28	47	13
often felt there was nothing to look forward to	49	12	35	5
found it *hard* or *very hard* to deal with stressful situations at home and at school:	68	46	59	28
N =	202	702	129	767
Percent =	22%	78%	14%	86%

continued on next page

Table 10, continued

	Females		Males	
	Have tried to hurt self %	Have not tried to hurt self %	Have tried to hurt self %	Have not tried to hurt self %
Percent who, in the last month:				
never felt sad and hopeless	11	89	9	91
never felt there was nothing to look forward to	8	93	6	96
never found it hard to deal with stressful situations at home and at school:	63	37	39	42
N =	203	704	125	773
Percent =	22%	78%	14%	86%

less reported having tried to hurt themselves at some time in a way that might have resulted in their death. Sixty-three percent of the females and 39% of the males who had *never* felt that it was difficult to handle stressful situations in the last thirty days reported having tried to hurt themselves.

Part of the difficulty in interpreting these data is that the suicide question (hurt yourself) did not include a time limit. Therefore the reported events could have happened at any time. The questions on feeling sad, having nothing to look forward to, or having difficulty handling stressful situations were all limited to the thirty days prior to the survey.

The important point to remember is that adolescence is a time of rapid growth and learning new roles and responsibilities. Accordingly, mood swings and difficulty coping with stress are "normal." It's important therefore to be sensitive to signs that suggest real problems while not overreacting to temporary states. In these data, the feeling of sadness, depression and hopelessness is not at all clearly linked to the likelihood of having thought about or tried suicide.

Nevertheless, it is clear that suicide is not a rare event, and actually trying to hurt oneself represents what could be an epidemic. Unfortunately we have little data from earlier times to confirm this epidemic status.

Conclusion

Nationwide, suicide and homicide are leading causes of death among adolescents 15 to 19 years old. Decreasing the nation's suicide rate is one of the 1990 health objectives for the nation that was not met. In Nebraska, the rate for adolescents 15-19 years old dying from violence increased 23% from 1984 to 1988. In 1988 Nebraska ranked 32nd in the nation's 50 states in violent teenage deaths.[2]

Like many health problems, those associated with violence are potentially contagious. They are also preventable. Those responsible for education and the welfare of young people need to recognize that: 1) for many the tendency to violence is learned, 2) violence is frequently enabled by the use of alcohol and other drugs, but most often alcohol, 3) the incidence of violence can be reduced through appropriate education programs and 4) for educational programs to reduce violence they must involve and generate support from all levels of the community.

Even though violence is a multifaceted problem, enough is known to develop potentially effective prevention programs. Such programs should include and address the following points.

Accepting Violence as a Public Health Problem

1. There is a need for community members, educational and public health personnel to recognize violence and its consequences among school age youth as a significant health problem in Nebraska.
2. Even though causes of violence are not fully understood it is possible to develop programs to prevent and reduce violence.
3. Parents must recognize that young people learn from their behaviors; therefore, parents must also develop skills to handle stress and tension that do not include violence.
4. Prevention programs need to help young people recognize, interpret and understand violence in their environment. They need to understand violence in terms other than the extreme. Fights, abuse, and inappropriate contact all constitute forms of violence and are unacceptable.
5. Media portrayals of violence need to be counteracted with realistic information. Instances of violence reported in the press and shown on television, for example, do not constitute the norm for society. Students should be helped to correct their normative perceptions.
6. Only when all segments of the community become aware of this issue and orient prevention services appropriately can we expect to note significant reductions in the types of violence described in this paper.

Program Suggestions

1. From the earliest grade levels, programs to prevent violence should encourage the development of a strong sense of personal worth and self esteem.

2. Opportunities to involve parents in all aspects of a youngster's education can potentially reduce the tendency to violence.

3. Prevention programs should teach people the signs of high risk individuals and suggest methods of early intervention.

4. Prevention programs that identify early indicators of high risk must also identify easily activated referral patterns to assist and treat students identified as high risk.

5. The establishment of easy referral patterns will involve increasing the general acceptance of using counseling and mental health services to reduce the stigma often attached to the use of these services.

6. Effective ways should be developed to reintegrate young people who have been absent from school back into the school. As part of this, other students and their teachers will need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of mental health, early intervention/prevention and the benefits of treatment.

7. Peer support groups at all levels of the community can be particularly effective in reducing risk, enabling ac-

cess to treatment and to providing continuing support for those who have received treatment.

8. Any comprehensive program aimed at reducing the incidence of violence will need to establish meaningful relationships between schools, law enforcement, and the judicial system. Young people need to learn to accept law enforcement officials as sources of help, and law enforcement need to develop skills in helping young people get help and reduce their chances of exposure to violence.

9. Much violence occurs in the home. Prevention programs need to ensure that individuals understand the state laws designed to prevent and intervene in domestic violence situations and to understand how they can get help.

10. Violence is often perpetrated by males upon females. Prevention programs need to help males develop more healthy ways to relate to females. Similarly, females need to learn and use effective ways to avoid risk and to deflect violence directed at them.

11. Those most responsible for young people's education, school officials, should recognize that they alone cannot effectively reduce violence among young people. They can, however, be effective catalysts to involve others of the community in developing effective prevention programs.

References

1. The Nebraska Adolescent Student Health Survey consisted of three separate questionnaires, each covering different topics. The three parts of the survey were each given to a random sample of 8th- and 10th-grade students. The data used in this report come from two different parts of the survey and two different samples. All the data in Tables 1-8, except Table 5, come from one sample of 1553 students in Grades 8 and 10. The data in Tables 5, 9 and 10 come from a different sample of 1830 students in Grades 8 and 10.

2. The Center for the Study of Social Policy. *Kids Count Data Book: 1991*, (The Annie E. Casey Foundation), Greenwich, Connecticutt, 06830.

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